

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 AID-05

SCCT-01 OPR-02 CU-02 COME-00 EB-07 FRB-03 TRSE-00

XMB-02 OPIC-03 CIEP-01 LAB-04 SIL-01 OMB-01 AGR-05

SNM-02 DEAE-00 PC-01 /097 W
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P R 052122Z MAR 76

FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3873

INFO AMCONSUL CALI UNN

AMCONSUL MEDELLIN

AMEMBASSY CARACAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 2434

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, CO

SUBJECT: THE WEEK IN COLOMBIA

1. SUMMARY. THE GOVERNMENT'S LABOR TROUBLES ABATED BUT STUDENT DISORDERS CONTINUED AND, IN MEDELLIN, FLARED TO A HIGH LEVEL. CTC PRESIDENT MERCADO REMAINED IN THE HANDS OF KIDNAPPERS AND, AT LEAST EARLIER IN THE WEEK, APPARENTLY WAS STILL ALIVE. THE RISE IN THE FEBRUARY COST OF LIVING INDEX WAS DISAPPOINTING TO GOC ANTI-INFLATION PLANNERS. AS THE APRIL 18 MID-TERM ELECTION DATE APPROACHED APATHY AND INTRA-PARTY RIVALRY CHARACTERIZED THE CAMPAIGN. THE RELEASE OF SEVERAL NOTORIOUS SUSPECTED DRUG TRAFFICKERS ONCE AGAIN CALLED INTO QUESTION COLOMBIA'S JUDICIAL CAPABILITY TO DEAL WITH THE DRUG AND CRIME PROBLEM. A NEW COMMANDER OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES ASSUMED CHARGE. END SUMMARY.

2. STUDENT DISORDERS CONTINUE-LABOR TURMOIL ABATES.

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UNIVERSITY STUDENT RIOTS IN BOGOTA AND MEDELLIN CONTINUED.

ON MARCH 4, TROOPS IN MEDELLIN, HARD PRESSED BY STUDENTS ARMED WITH MOLOTOV COCKTAILS, ACID, CLUBS AND STONES, REPORTEDLY SHOT ONE STUDENT TO DEATH AND SERIOUSLY WOUNDED THREE OTHERS. NUMEROUS OTHER INJURIES WERE REPORTED AND SEVERAL VEHICLES WERE BURNED BY STUDENTS. THE MILITARY BRIEFLY OCCUPIED UNIVERSITIES IN BOTH CITIES. THE DISORDERS IN MEDELLIN WERE THE WORST IN RECENT YEARS. MEANWHILE, LABOR UNREST IN THE FINANCE MINISTRY AND OTHER PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS ABATED. CONTRACTS WERE SIGNED IN SOME INSTANCES AND, IN OTHERS, THE NEGOTIATIONS ENTERED CONCILIATION. FOLLOWING A CABINET MEETING LAST WEEKEND, THE GOC ANNOUNCED IT WOULD TAKE UNSPECIFIED MEASURES, INCLUDING IF NECESSARY THE ISSUANCE OF NEW DECREES UNDER STATE OF SIEGE POWERS TO RESOLVE THE LABOR DISPUTES. THE MINISTRY OF LABOR BEGAN TO MEET WITH THE LABOR COFEDERATIONS AND PROMISED TO INTERVENE EARLIER IN DISPUTES IN ORDER TO AVERT STRIKES.

3. LABOR LEADER STILL HELD BY KIDNAPPERS. CTC PRESIDENT JOSE MERCADO IS STILL BEING HELD BY HIS KIDNAPPERS, THE LEFTIST TERRORIST GROUP, M-19 (BOGOTA 2123). EARLIER IN THE WEEK A LETTER WRITTEN BY MERCADO WAS RECEIVED BY OFFICIALS OF THE CTC. MERCADO SAID HE WAS BEING HELD AS A POLITICAL PRISONER, WAS WELL TREATED AND EXPECTED TO BE BACK WITH HIS FRIENDS SOON. THE M-19 OBTAINED MUCH PUBLICITY FROM THE KIDNAPPING UP TO THE MERCADO LETTER, AFTER WHICH THERE HAS BEEN NO FURTHER KNOWN COMMUNICATION.

4. PRICES UP AGAIN. THE FEBRUARY COST OF LIVING INDEX INCREASED BY 2.4 PERCENT, AN INCREASE SLIGHTLY ABOVE JAN AND WHICH SETS AN ANNUAL RATE OF 19 PERCENT. UNLESS PRICE INCREASES SLOW SOON THE ADMINISTRATIONS 1976 TARGET OF 15 PERCENT WILL BE HARD TO HIT. RAPID MONETARY EXPANSION (DURING THE LAST QUARTER OF 1975) AND PERHAPS A SEASONAL DECLINE IN AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT SEEM TO BE THE CAUSE OF THE INFLATION. PESO DEVALUATION MAY ALSO BE TOO RAPID.

5. POLITICAL PARTIES CAMPAIGN AMIDST WIDESPREAD APATHY. PRECINCT REGISTRATIONS END MARCH 19. IN BOGOTA, AS OF MARCH 2, ONLY 50,000 VOTERS HAD REGISTERED. IN 1972, PRECINCT

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REGISTRATIONS REACHED 198,000. SIMILAR TRENDS PREVAIL ELSEWHERE IN COLOMBIA. THUS, IN THE TWO REMAINING WEEKS, THE TEMPO OF REGISTRATIONS MUST PICK UP CONSIDERABLY IN ORDER TO EVEN COMPARE WITH THE PREVIOUS MID-TERM ELECTION. MANY POLITICAL OBSERVERS REMAIN SKEPTICAL. FOLLOWERS OF EX-PRESIDENT LLERAS CITED A PUBLIC OPINION POLL WHICH INDICATED CONCERN OVER UNEMPLOYMENT, SECURITY, AND THE COST OF LIVING AS REASONS FOR VOTER APATHY.

THE FOLLOWERS OF FORMER CONSERVATIVE PRESIDENTS OSPINA AND PASTRANA, ANNOUNCED UNIFIED SLATES OF CANDIDATES FOR THE BOGOTA AND CUNDINAMARCA ELECTIONS. THEIR CAMPAIGN STRESSES OPPOSITION TO THE ALLEGED PASSIVE PARTICIPATION OF ALVARISTA CONSERVATIVES IN THE LOPEZ CABINET. LLERISTA AND TURBAYISTA LIBERALS HAVE OPENLY ATTACKED EACH OTHER FOR SEVERAL WEEKS. INTRA-PARTY RIVALRY RATHER THAN TRADITIONAL LIBERAL VS CONSERVATIVE COMPETITION THUS CHARACTERIZES THE PRE-ELECTORAL ATMOSPHERE.

6. DRUG TRAFFICKERS RELEASED FROM JAIL. TWO NOTORIOUS DRUG TRAFFICKERS AND SIX OTHER DRUG SUSPECTS WERE UNEXPECTEDLY SET FREE BY JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES AFTER BRIEF DETENTION. IN CALL, THE SO-CALLED "BLACK POPE OF COCAINE" WAS RELEASED ON A WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS FOLLOWING HIS ARREST FOR POSSESSION OF OVER A KILO OF COCAINE (BOGOTA 2123). AUTHORITIES NOW FEAR HE HAS FLED THE COUNTRY. IN BOGOTA, SEVEN OTHERS ARRESTED AFTER A SHOOT-OUT AT BOGOTA'S AIRPORT (BOGOTA 1639) WERE RELEASED ON GROUNDS OF INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE. POLICE WERE INCREDULOUS THAT PERSONS KNOWN TO BE LINKED TO DRUG TRAFFICKING WOULD GET OFF SO EASILY, DESPITE DIFFICULTY IN GATHERING HARD EVIDENCE AGAINST THEM, AND EDITORIAL COMMENT BY THE PRESS AND CIVILIAN JURISTS HAVE QUESTIONED THE ACTIONS OF THE TWO MILITARY COURTS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RELEASES.

7. NEW COLOMBIAN MILITARY COMMANDER. GENERAL CARLOS LOMBANA CUERVO, FORMER CHIEF OF THE JOINT GENERAL STAFF, ASSUMED COMMAND OF THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES ON 1 MARCH FOLLOWING THE RETIREMENT OF THE FORMER COMMANDER, GENERAL HERRERA CALDERON. GENERAL LOMBANA IS NOW SECOND ONLY TO THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE, GENERAL ABRAHAM VARON VALENCIA, IN THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY HIERARCHY. HE IS CONFIDENTIAL

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A SECOND COUSIN OF PRESIDENT LOPEZ AND IS CONSIDERED A LIKELY SUCCESSOR TO GERNAL VARON AS MOD POSSIBLY THIS SUMMER. HE IS BELIEVED TO BE PRO-US AND HAS PRIVATELY EXPRESSED TO DATT AND MILGP PERSONNEL HIS CONVICTION THAT THE COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES SHOULD CONTINUE TO RELY PRIMARILY ON US MILITARY EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING.
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